

Business Briefs

Nuclear Radiation

Chernobyl Had No Major Public Health Impact

"There is no scientific evidence of a major public health impact attributable to radiation exposure 14 years after the accident" at Chernobyl, the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (Unscar) said, in a report to the UN General Assembly on June 6. "There is no scientific evidence of increases in overall cancer incidence or mortality or in non-malignant disorders that could be related to radiation exposure. The risk of leukemia, one of the main concerns owing to its short latency time, does not appear to be elevated, not even among the recovery operation workers."

Unscar Chairman Lars-Erik Holm also sent a letter to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on June 6, protesting a report on Chernobyl issued by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The report, titled "Chernobyl—A Continuing Catastrophe," he said, "is full of unsubstantiated statements that have no support in scientific assessments." Dr. Holm, who is also the Director-General of the Swedish Radiation Protection Institute, says that there are only about 1,800 cases of childhood thyroid cancers, not the more than 11,000 stated in the OCHA report.

Dr. Holm refutes the OCHA report claim that "very little is known about the long-term health effects of exposure to radiation because it is a relatively new phenomenon." To the contrary, he says, "More is known about radiation than for almost any other carcinogen." Holm comments on the OCHA statement that the radiation in the contaminated areas around Chernobyl has "changed the genetic material (DNA) in voles so much that it would be equivalent to 15 million years of evolution," that "it is highly remarkable that an organization in the United Nations system can publish such scientifically unfounded statements."

"The United Nations system has a responsibility to reduce human suffering and to see to it that the affected populations are not unnecessarily scared by unfounded rumors," Dr. Holm says.

Health

War vs. Communicable Disease Could Be Lost

David Heymann, the executive director of the World Health Organization's program on communicable diseases, warned on June 12 that the fight against communicable diseases could be lost over the next 10-20 years, unless better use is made of available resources. "The world may only have a decade or two to make use of many of the medicines presently available to stop infectious diseases. We are literally in a race against time to bring levels of infectious disease down worldwide, before the diseases wear the drug down first," Heymann told Agence France Presse

Heymann cited the cases of two Baltic states (Estonia and Latvia), and parts of Russia, where 10% of all cases of tuberculosis are drug-resistant. The three most effective anti-malaria drugs are no longer of any use in Thailand, due to the development of drug-resistant strains; and 30% of patients treated for hepatitis B find that the most advanced medicine available is ineffective after one year. "It took 20 years to develop penicillin for medical use," he stated, "and then 20 years for this drug to become virtually useless for treating gonorrhea in most parts of the world."

Heymann warned that the failure to develop public-health infrastructure in developing countries is a big cause for concern, while in advanced nations, patients are being over-prescribed antibiotics. In addition, the major pharmaceutical firms are not investing enough effort in developing new medicines to combat infectious diseases that have already out-paced existing medicines.

Space

NASA Contracts To Build Plasma Rocket

NASA's Johnson Space Center has signed a contract with MSE Technology Applications, Inc., of Butte, Montana, to develop a plasma rocket, the precursor to a fusion

rocket. The director of Johnson's Advanced Space Propulsion Laboratory, Franklin Chang-Diaz, a NASA astronaut with a doctorate in applied plasma physics and fusion technology, has enthusiastically supported the concept since 1979. The Variable Specific Impulse Magnetoplasma Rocket (VASIMR) "provides a power-rich, fast-propulsion architecture," Chang-Diaz said on June 13, and would cut in half the time required to reach Mars (three instead of seven to eight months).

The VASIMR engine consists of three linked magnetic cells, the first of which handles the main injection of propellant gas and its ionization. The middle cell acts as an amplifier to further heat the plasma. The rear cell is a magnetic nozzle, which converts the energy of the fluid into directed flow. Hydrogen, or another neutral gas, is injected into the forward cell and ionized. The resulting plasma is electromagnetically energized in the central cell by ion cyclotron resonance heating. In this process, radiowaves heat the plasma, which is then magnetically exhausted to provide thrust.

The VASIMR technology has the capability of modulating the plasma exhaust to maintain optimal efficiency of propulsion. Among the new technologies being developed for the concept, are magnets that are superconducting at space temperatures, compact power-generation equipment, and compact radio-frequency systems for plasma generation and heating.

Britain

Trade Unions Alarmed by Manufacturing Crisis

The British Trades Union Congress, the main confederation of labor unions, has sent a document to Cabinet ministers, demanding action to deal with the "major crisis" in British manufacturing, according to the June 14 London *Times*. The document has been circulated preparatory to a planned meeting of TUC leaders with Prime Minister Tony Blair, Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, and Trade and Industry Secretary Stephen Byers.

CAMBODIAN Planning Minister Chhay Than led a delegation to Malaysia on June 3, seeking Malaysia's input in the formulation of Cambodia's five-year development plans, and to learn from Malaysia's economic success. Malaysia is Cambodia's largest investor among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in fields including primary industries, property development, oil and gas, and manufacturing.

MEDIA MAGNATE Rupert Murdoch's son James has been appointed chairman of Hong Kong's Star TV, which is sitting on a potential windfall as the company best positioned to capitalize on China's fiber-optic network roll-out, which will connect 120 million subscribers by next year.

SUDAN AND CHAD agreed to cooperate on crop production and pest control, on June 14. Sudan will train Chadian officials in plant protection. A law will be drafted on quarantines to ensure crop safety, and seeds and information on the movement and control of desert locusts, exchanged. Sudan consented to a Chadian request to increase the capital of the N'djamena branch of the government-run Sudanese Agricultural Bank.

CHINA'S Ji Yunshi, Governor of Jiangsu province, visited South Africa's Free State in early June, in a bid to boost economic ties between the two provinces. A partnership may be set up between business people of the provinces, and a student exchange program. Chinese investment has been steadily growing, especially in Botshabelo, where 68% of factories are owned by people of Chinese origin.

PAKISTAN Chief Executive Gen. Pervez Musharraf said on June 11 that Pakistan has given the green light to the proposed pipeline to transport gas from Iran to India. Islamabad, starved of cash, would garner \$600 million annually from the project; but it is unlikely to advance, because of India's security concerns.

Pointing to the crisis that has hit the Rover auto manufacturing group, the TUC says that this is "the biggest in a series of high-profile restructurings by major companies. . . . There are many less well-known companies either closing or cutting back severely, and shifting orders to overseas suppliers."

The TUC charges that the government is failing to give "manufacturing the priority it warrants." It warns: "The view that manufacturing no longer matters—that services can act as the motor for faster economic growth—shows a breathtaking ignorance of economic realities and the trends of the past 40 years." The TUC calls for the government to adopt a "properly funded industrial program."

Economic Policy

New Book: Egypt's Future Lies with Land-Bridge

Dr. Mohammed Selim, chairman of the Asian Studies Centers at the University of Cairo, promotes the idea of Egypt's connection to the New Silk Road as a viable future economic and strategic policy, in a new book based on studies presented at a seminar in Port Said, Egypt, in April (see *EIR*, May 26). Dr. Selim introduces the subject by saying: "Railways have played an important role in economic development processes as a prelude to this development or as part of it. It is well-known that the transcontinental railway networks in the United States and Canada to link the east coast to the west coast greatly contributed to the emergence of the economic power of these two countries."

He adds that the Ottoman Sultans' ambitious plan in the late 19th century to build a railway to Baghdad was a similar attempt. However, he stresses, "the fruits of this project were never harvested, because it became a field for competing imperial interests."

"Today, there are two major projects for railway construction: The first is the Transasian Railway, which was started in the 1970s and is limited to Asia; the second is the Eurasian Land-Bridge, or the 'New Silk Road,' which is a project that started in the 1990s to link Europe and Asia. This latter project is the subject of this book."

Dr. Selim rejects arguments that the New Silk Road project would decrease the flow of goods through the Suez Canal. He says that what will happen is the contrary, due to the great industrial development of Eurasia.

Dr. Selim reports on the growing interest in the region for this idea, citing reports in *EIR* from 1999, on the increasing cooperation among Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia to revive the Hijaz Railway, and the Egyptian government's plans to build industrial projects in the north of the country which are directly connected to rebuilding the "Orient Express" through Sinai to Gaza and Israel. These efforts, he says, should be expanded to the Land-Bridge, with Egypt serving as a link among Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Finance

Italian Banker Promotes Bretton Woods System

Abandoning the post-World War II Bretton Woods system did not bring stability, Italian central banker Antonio Fazio told government, business, parliament, judiciary, church, labor, and other institutional leaders, in his yearly report on May 31.

"In a recent historical phase it was believed, after abandoning the monetary order that was created in Bretton Woods, that a financial system left, in its development and in its operations, in the hands of market forces, would automatically lead to growth and to the stability of the world economy. The experience of the last two decades has presented . . . phenomena of marginalization of some weaker systems and instability episodes, which have risked involving the finances and economies of even larger countries," he said. Without using the word "regulation," he called for governing the system in a way that "leaves single intermediaries a freedom which is compatible with stability."

"Financial capitalism," Fazio said, "has shown itself to be a powerful factor for creating wealth, but at the same time, even more unstable than traditional industrial capitalism."